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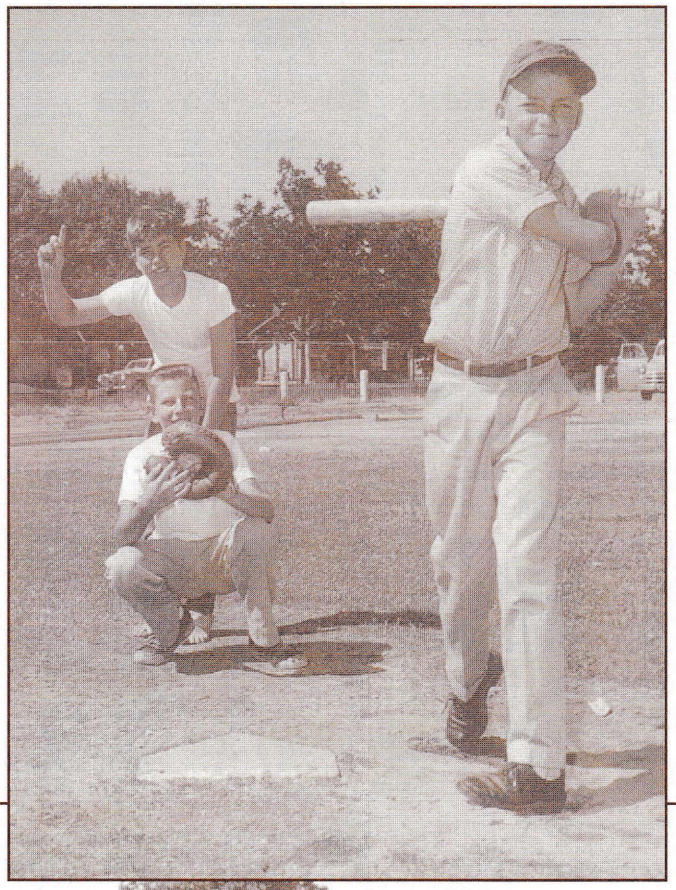
LODI RECREATION

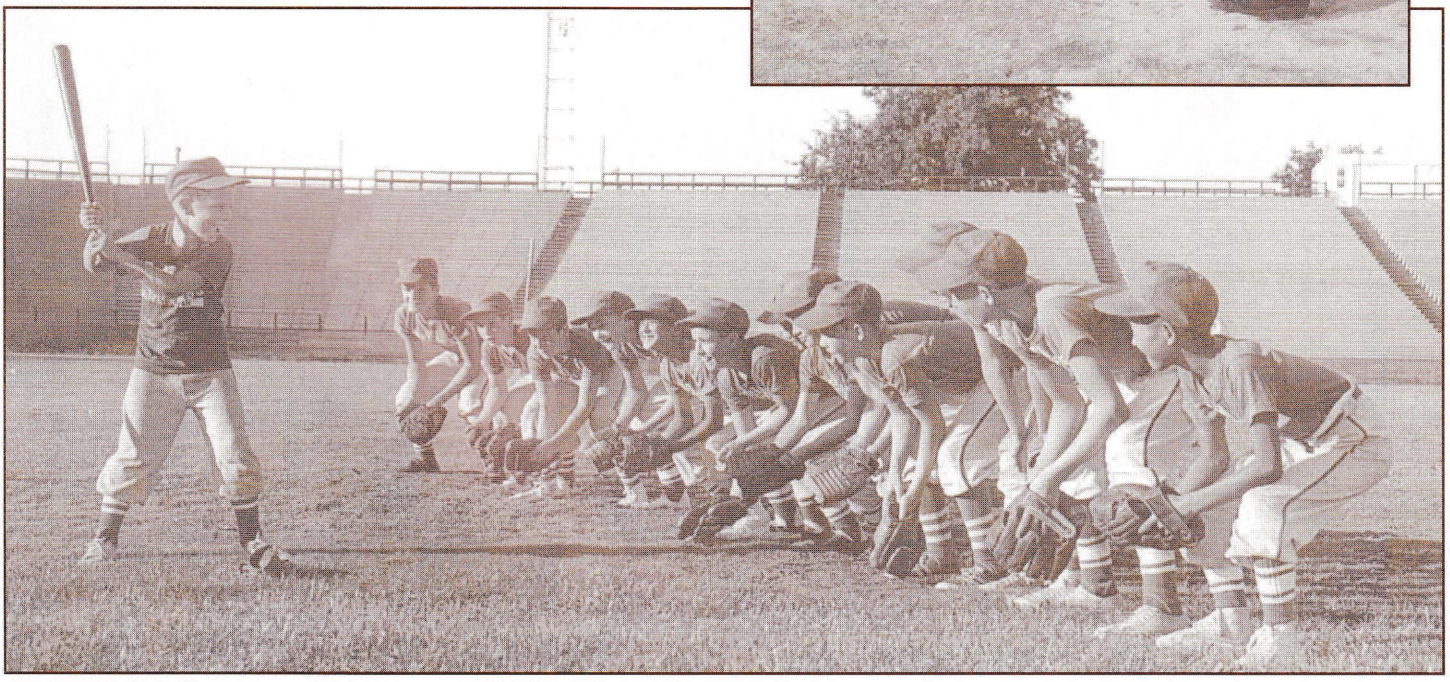
By Ralph Lea and Janice Roth

Recreation, as we know it today, was unheard of in Lodi of the 1870's. The pioneers and early settlers often went to Spenker's Grove (west of town), Tretheway's Grove (east of town) and Wardrobe's Grove (in town) where they picnicked or celebrated special occasions. Schools and churches also frequented these groves. Baseball and other games were often played at these outings. At school, games were played at recess, with the boys in one area and the girls in another. "Shinny," a game played like field hockey, was one of the games. A branch from a tree served as the stick and a block of wood or can served as the puck. Unfortunately, the shins received most of the blows. "Pig in a Hole" was a game where one person tried to drive an object with a club through the circle of players to a hole in the center of the circle.

If someone could bring a pig's bladder after a home butchering, the boys would play football as long as the bladder held its shape. After school there was no playing since students had chores.

By 1876, Lodi had a brass band





▲ *Top Photo: Strike One! in a Lodi Recreation playground. Bottom Photo: Lodi Stadium.*

▲ *James Loveall, Lodi High Boxing Coach, teaching recreation students.*

1942; Maybe next year, boys! ▶

and a few years later, both debating and literary societies. To keep boys out of the pool hall, a small reading room or library was established. On Sunday afternoons, men and boys raced horses and dogs although a majority of the parents would not let their children play baseball or other games on the Sabbath.

When Lodi was incorporated in 1906, the town was so busy obtaining money for water, electricity, sewers, and paved streets that parks and recreation areas were not considered. However, other groups were working on projects.

By 1910 the Lodi Women's Improvement Club was able to convince the Southern Pacific Railroad to make the reservation along Sacramento Street, from Oak to Elm Street, a city park. The town furnished the water so that trees and grass could be planted.

Baseball diamonds were located on private property. One was located east of the railroad and south of Lodi Avenue. The other baseball site was on the George Lawrence property north of Lockeford Street. Both men and women played softball in Lawrence's Pioneer Park. Although these games were not sponsored by the city many of the citizens enjoyed summer evenings watching these sports.

The Tokay Band, with the help of town merchants, was playing concerts under the Mission Arch (Lodi Arch) during the summers of 1910 and 1911.

About this time, the Church of God offered to sell part of Wardrobe's Grove to the city for $8,000.00, but the city had no tax-revenue money to buy property. In 1916, the city did buy part of Wardrobe's Grove (Hale Park) to build a swimming tank, 300 feet by 40 feet that included electric lights on the bottom to aid lifesaving. It was hoped that this would stop the dangerous swimming in the Mokelumne River.

Five years earlier, the Lodi Gas Co. had drilled a 1,900-foot-deep gas well on the Sanguinetti property just south of the river. One hundred gallons a minute of 90degree water passed through a 10-inch pipe from this artesian well to the new roof-covered city plunge. The outside walls were covered with rustic redwood siding to make it Peeping Tom-proof. There was a children's pool, as well as a large adult area with plenty of

▲ *Lodi Recreation Model Crafts.*

Lodi Recreation: the Majorettes outnumber the Majors. ▲

diving space. J. C. Ferguson was in charge, and later W. G. Hurrle became Superintendent of Lodi Parks and the Baths.

In 1934 the city purchased Lodi Lake. In the late 1930s, the Lodi Civitan Club was formed and started a Boy's Club with boxing matches, basketball games in church gymnasiums, and baseball on the corner sandlots. Roy Coffman, Lodi police officer, was the director. In 1938, the city was debating the use of the Salem School site as a playground. In March 1939, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the city decided to build the Lodi Stadium (Grape Bowl) in Pioneer Park for $150,000.00.

The Lodi Coordinating Council and the Civitan Club persuaded the City of Lodi and the school district to conduct a survey to determine if Lodi needed public recreation. Ralph

Boat rentals and learning to row on Lodi Lake. ▲

Time for watermelon! Tom Atkins cutting. ▲

▲ *Ye Olde Hangout; in 1946, the youth now had their own place for dances at the Lodi High School Girls Gym.*

Francis, a student of the College of the Pacific, conducted the survey as part of his master's thesis. Francis found that Lodi did need an organized program for recreation. State law passed in 1939 enabled cities to conduct a recreation program. A total of $14,225.00 was spent that year on recreation in the city of Lodi. That same year the City of Lodi formed a Recreation Commission to establish and direct the recreation program. The first commission had as its president Dr. Irving Ridenour and Stella Higginbotham, secretary. Other members were C. R. VanBuskirk, Lester N. Wilson, Thurlow Haskell, Mayor Robert Rinn, and Leroy Nichols, Superintendent of Schools in Lodi.

The Lodi Recreation Department was established July 1, 1941, under the direction of Ralph Francis and Dick Smith. W. G. Hurrle was Superintendent of Parks, and Florence Dudley was hired as cashier at the Lodi Baths.

At the start of the 1942 recreation program, Ralph Francis was drafted into the army. Dick Smith, high school coach, took over the recreation on an interim basis.

The first recreation office was located in a small room on the ground floor of City Hall. After a few years the operation was moved to the basement because there was more room. Later the Department of Recreation moved to the second floor of City Hall.

In 1930 a young man, who was to have a great influence on Lodi's youth, was doing graduate study at the University of California and working part time at playgrounds for the cities of Berkeley and Oakland. A year later, Arvid Pauly began teaching in the town of Rodeo, in Contra Costa County, where he started an after-school recreation program.

In 1939, Pauly became Superintendent of the Rodeo School District, but became discouraged because of opposition to his plan to set up a recreation center. Pauly informed the district that his name had been submitted for Recreation Director in Lodi.

On September 15, 1942, the Department of Recreation was placed under the direction of Pauly. At his first official meeting with the Recreation Commission and mayor of Lodi, it was decided that Pauly should take charge of and have direct control of the teenage center dances that were held at Eagle's Hall. The student bandleader, Ray Coe, was to determine the admission charge.

Pauly attended the dance that very night and observed several problems. Members of the Civitan Club were the chaperones, but no woman was present. There was a definite drinking problem. In fact, Pauly observed that over half of the teenagers had been drinking. The senior boys appeared restless and disturbed; the wartime conditions of

uncertainty perhaps contributed to the drinking. To establish rules for conduct at the dances, Pauly set up a committee that included many of these high school students. The plan to use the students was successful.

A short time later, the leader of the student band brought a bill to Pauly from the Internal Revenue Service stating that the sponsors of the dances owed about $450.00 in back taxes. Pauly went to see the IRS and explained that the Department of Recreation had no jurisdiction over the dances. Pauly's offer to pay $50.00 was accepted.

World War II was taking boys out of town of Lodi rapidly. The summer and fall of 1942, Pauly had 16 lifeguard positions and used 132 different students to fill the jobs. He was finally forced to hire women lifeguards and found two outstanding ones in Elvera Melby and Catherine Cain. At the same time, Pauly started swimming instructions in the Lodi Municipal Baths with Stella Higginbotham and Ann Devine as volunteer teachers; both ladies were also working full-time as high school instructors.

Pauly started staging dances at the National Guard Armory, particularly following the football games and other athletic contests. The student orchestra had disbanded as members left for armed service.

By 1943 a large improvement was seen in Lodi recreation. The Western Defense Command relaxed the rules regarding the use of lights and night softball was resumed with 10 teams. Sam Ullman's Star Deluxe girl's team led the group.

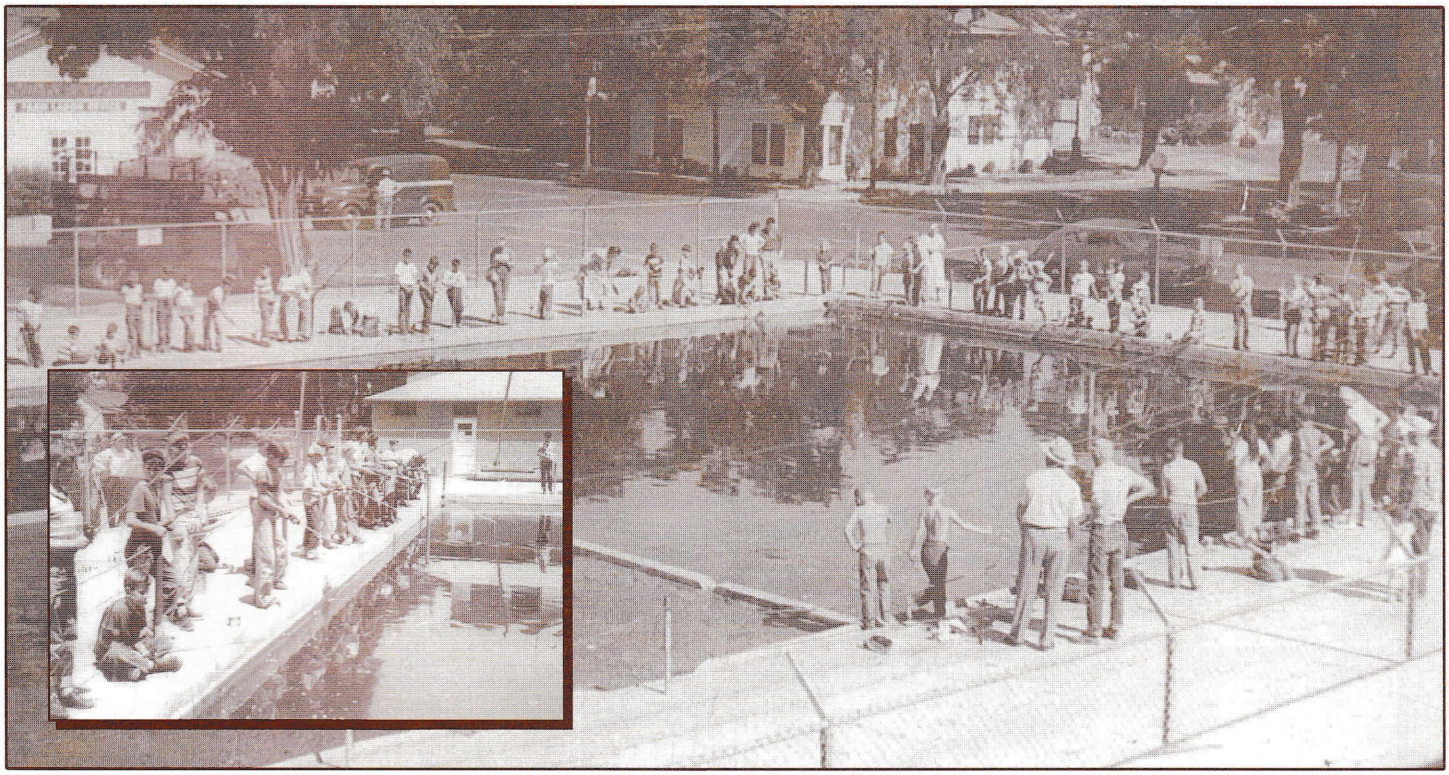
The high school Board of Trustees gave permission to the Recreation Commission and the Youth Commission to use the high school cafeteria, girl's gym, and swimming pool during the summer months. The teenage center, Ye Olde Hangout, officially opened June 22, 1943. Four hundred teenagers attended the opening and danced the night away to the music of Tommy Atkins. Pauly was very proud of this club. It had excellent leaders. Money was raised with performers like Pat (Weigum) Yankee, the leading lady in their first variety show.

On December 11, 1943, the National Guard Armory was opened as an indoor play center. February 16, 1944, the armory was closed by order of Brigadier General Hays. Police Chief Jackson reported a jump of 10 juvenile cases per week after the closing of the center.

Pauly, determined to secure the use of the building, contacted the captain of the local National Guard. He suggested that Pauly join the National Guard. He did join and, as Pvt. Pauly, had an interview with General Hays, Adjutant General of the State of California. Pauly explained that the City of Lodi was the owner of the armory and the state was leasing the building.

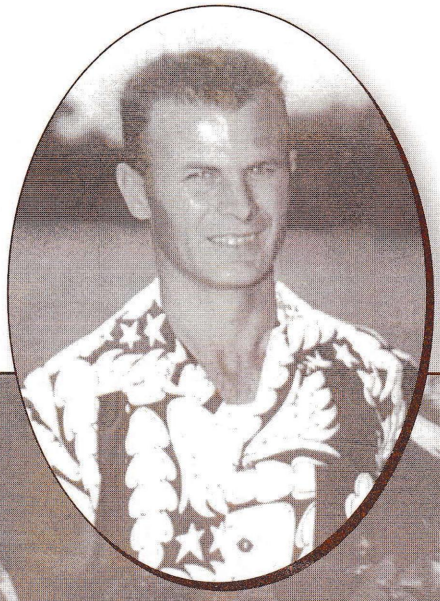
The information was a matter of public record, but few citizens were aware. Pauly felt that publicizing the information would cause indignation toward the National Guard. General Hays agreed, and permission to use the armory was granted.

Pauly had this to say after completing a year as Lodi Recreation Director: "The sound of laughter, and the sight of happy children playing on grounds, apparatus, and facilities furnished them by the community, along with competent leadership, is a symbol of the American way of life.



In 1951 the building over the baths was removed by the Boy Scouts and the old fishin' hole began. ▲ Building in upper left corner was the Employment Office, now the Recreation Office.

▲ *Tommy Atkins, coaching early track and field on the festival grounds in Lodi.*



The security and confidence gained by the child from the haven of a playground or play center is one of the immeasurables which recreation provides."

In the summer of 1941, Eddie DeBenedetti was working for "Spud" Fuller's Sporting Goods Store on School Street. DeBenedetti became disillusioned with salesmanship. He had just finished with a difficult customer when Fuller told DeBenedetti that he was not cut out to be a salesman. DeBenedetti decided that he had enough and asked for his final check. Just as DeBenedetti was leaving the store, he met Arvid Pauly, who asked why he was so downcast. After hearing the story, Pauly asked DeBenedetti to come to work for the city the next day.

The first morning at work, DeBenedetti went to Lodi Lake and cleaned out the boats and the restrooms. In the afternoon, he cleaned up a playground, and then dragged the softball diamond and white-lined the bases. After a fast meal at home, he came back to umpire one softball game and score another game. DeBenedetti became a playground director and later was Pauly's right-hand man.

In the summer of 1947, Joe Wilson, playground director at Needham School, was trying to keep up interest in a baseball game. The boys kept talking about "going fishing." Wilson put the baseball equipment away, locked the playground,

▲ *The Junior Sportsman Club under the leadership of Joe Wilson, shown in inset.*

secured some fishing equipment, and he and the boys went fishing. This was the start of the Junior Sportsman Club. The first meeting was held in the Congregational Church with 22 boys in attendance. After three years, the club had a membership of more than 300. The club worked with the Boy Scouts to instill the youngsters with respect for other people's property and the appreciation of our wild game.

In 1948 businessmen Fuller and Harold Wells and DeBenedetti of the Lodi Recreation Department decided that the younger boys needed a summer sports program to fill of their leisure time. Fuller and Wells each sponsored a team, two service clubs paid for suits and equipment for two more teams, the city recreation paid for umpires, and DeBenedetti and Tommy Atkins supervised the play. This was the Little League Program that grew to 72 teams twelve years later.

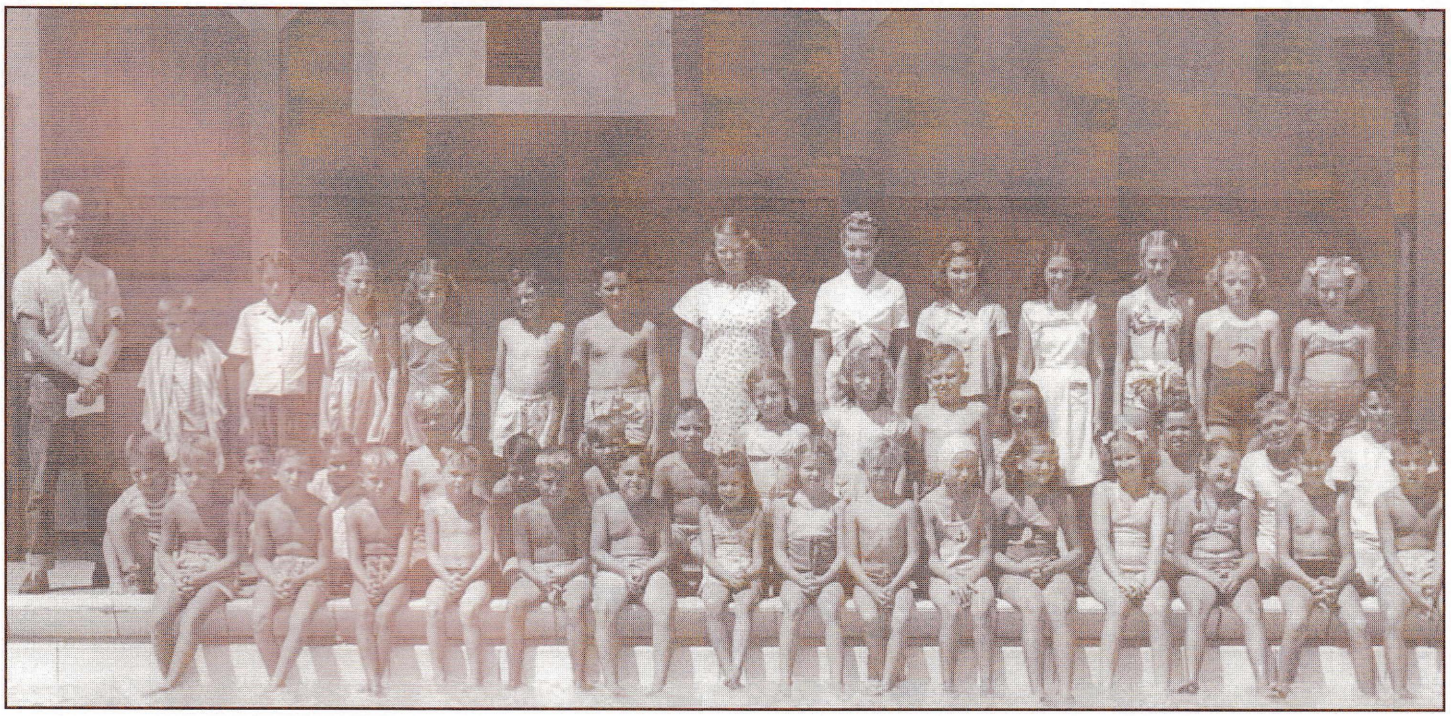
The same year that Little League was started in Lodi, the State of California established a Recreation Commission and asked Pauly to be a member. Everyone was sorry to see Pauly leave, but City Manager Doug Weller was then able to avoid some embarrassment as Pauly was paid more money than the police or fire chief.

Ed Benedetti and City Manager H. D. Weller at the opening of the Lodi High swimming pool. ▲

Before departing, Pauly said that DeBenedetti was very capable and should be given an opportunity to fill the position. Recreation Department secretary Florence Dudley quoted Pauly as saying, "You could put Eddie seven miles out in the country and kids would follow him."

Forty-five people were interviewed for the job. A man from Pasadena was offered the position but changed his mind and took another job. He instead recommended very strongly that DeBenedetti, who had shown the Pasadena man around the city, be given the job.

On July 1, 1949, DeBenedetti was named director of the department. With 15 percent of the budget left and six months to the end of the year, DeBenedetti was determined to balance the budget without curtailing the recreation program. He became a one-man department, doing almost everything himself. He worked up to 18 hours a day for only $175.00 per month. He continued the aquatic program by lifeguarding and renting boats. He umpired games and maintained the playing fields.



▲ *Red Cross swimming lessons at the Lodi High pool, conducted by Lodi Recreation; Orest Merry, instructor.*

▲ *Three men who contributed greatly to Lodi baseball: Tony Zupo, Eddie DeBenedetti, and Herb Handel.*

▲ *Lodi Recreation; mothers in attendance for awards.*

DeBenedetti's wife, Joyce, sometimes dragged the baseball fields and did other tasks. Eddie did everything from cleaning toilets to conferring with the City Council. When the year ended, the department was not in the red.

The new director was to assume more responsibility with the operation and maintenance of all the city parks, plus the facilities of the school district. By 1954, the third full-time employee was added to the department. Tom Atkins was named Supervisor of Athletics.

In 1951, the Recreation Commission consisted of Ray VanBuskirk, Stella Higginbotham, Jim Conklin, Jim Crescenzi, and Lloyd Patton. On July Fourth, the commission and the city sponsored the first boat races, water-ski show, and fireworks for 16,000 people at Lodi Lake. This was also the grand opening of the new Lodi Golf Driving Range with Rusty Hemphill as manager. In 1956, the City of Lodi and the Lodi Unified School District entered into an agreement for reciprocal use of community and school facilities.

With the assistance of DeBenedetti from 1950 to 1961, the city augmented its recreational areas and facilities with the purchase of Blakely, Emerson, and American Legion Parks, and the acquisition of more land at Lodi Lake Park and swimming pools at Blakely and the West Campus.

Lodi had a great start in recreation, thanks to people like Pauly and DeBenedetti, who worked to help young people become adults.

Thank you to Charles Gritts for the thesis he presented to Sacramento State College for his Master of Arts Degree in 1960.

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▲ *Ladies tennis, held on the resurfaced court next to the Boy Scout building (old baths).*